

Road funds may exceed \$503 million

A bill passed Thursday would increase Oklahoma's share of federal highway funds by \$38 million and includes more than \$57 million for specific projects

By Chris Casteel Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Oklahoma's share of federal highway funds would top \$503 million next year under a bill passed Thursday that includes a boost in the state's annual allocation and extra money for projects, including the Crosstown Expressway in Oklahoma City.

The House Appropriations Committee approved a transportation spending bill written largely by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Warr Acres. Istook is chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee with jurisdiction over funding for transportation, the U.S. Treasury Department, the Internal Revenue Service, the White House and other agencies.

The spending bill goes to the full House, where it won't see action until September. It also will have to be reconciled with the Senate bill before going to the White House.

To avoid contentious debates in the committee, Istook had revised his plan to increase highway spending by making major cuts to Amtrak, rural air service and a program that funds such projects as bicycle trails, pedestrian walkways and transportation museums.

But he said Thursday his rewritten legislation still includes a boost to highway funding above last year's level and, at \$33.8 billion, is more than \$4 billion above the amount President Bush requested for road construction and maintenance.

He gave states the option of spending money they receive for "transportation enhancement" projects — such as bike trails and walkways — on highways instead. Republicans on

—the committee fought back an attempt by Democrats on Thursday to make spending on enhancements mandatory, as it is now.

Rep. John Olver, D-Mass., said the enhancement money had been one of the most popular aspects of the current transportation policy, providing recreational trails and attractions that would not otherwise have been built.

But Istook said the law tells states they must spend a percentage of their federal road money on enhancements "even if your basic transportation needs are coming apart."

The language in his bill, he said, "tells states they can decide what their priorities are."

One of Istook's major priorities, to cut Amtrak funding, was derailed by opposition from lawmakers and threats from the passenger rail service that it would have to shut down. Istook

wanted to allocate \$580 million to Amtrak — a cut of \$463 million from this year — and require the money to be spent only on its routes in the Northeast and on the West Coast.

However, he revised the bill to match the Bush administration's request — \$900 million for next year.

The committee defeated an attempt to add another \$500 million to Amtrak's budget by raising taxes on people with adjusted gross incomes of \$1 million or more.

A longtime critic of Amtrak, Istook included language in the report accompanying his bill, saying Amtrak needs to scale back and only operate the routes that have the most demand.

"After years of mortgaging, leasing and misleading Congress about the state of the corporation, Amtrak is finally facing a time where fundamental system change is necessary," the report states.

In its original form, Istook's bill would have provided an allocation of about \$458 million to the Oklahoma Transportation Department for its federal highway priorities — an increase of \$50 million from last year.

However, Istook had to cut more than \$800 million overall from the annual state allocations, and Oklahoma's share is expected to be about \$446 million — an increase of \$38 million. The bill includes an additional \$57 million in special project money.

Of that, \$13.3 million would go to the massive Crosstown Expressway project on Interstate 40 near downtown Oklahoma City. It is the largest allocation to the project since 1997, when about \$100 million was included in the highway authorization bill.

Still, the project is short by more than \$230 million, and Oklahoma Transportation Department officials have resisted using any of the state's regular allocation, pushing instead for the federal government to commit all the funds specifically for the widening and relocation project.